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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of theoretical premises in the design and implementation of a study of men's perceptions of fatherhood. Forty Australian fathers participated in small discussion groups over a 7-week period regarding contemporary fatherhood. Data were collected using questionnaires, including the Perception of Parental Role Scales, the Social Interest Index and Social Interest Scale, and the Lifestyle Scale. The experience of fatherhood was explicated using constructs from symbolic interactionism and individual psychology. By examining the data from these theoretical perspectives, a synthesis was created between issues which stem from social structures and those which exist at a personal level. Several findings emerged: (1) fathers perceived their highest frequency of involvement to be in meeting children's emotional needs; (2) 70 percent held values congruent with high social interest, cooperation, and altruism and valued fatherhood experiences related to sharing affection and experiences with their children; (3) most fathers experienced the balance of work, family, and leisure as problematic; and (4) lifestyle priorities indicated parenting style and contributed to involvement in the father role. The results indicated that an interdisciplinary synthesis requires clear links between theory, methodology, and data analysis. (Contains 22 references.) (KDFB)

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DADS, DATA AND DISCOURSE: THEORY, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION IN PARENTING RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Methodologies have been described in parenting research with only scant reference to the relationship between theoretical constructs and data collection and analysis. This paper discusses the use of theoretical premises in the design and implementation of an interpretive study of men's perceptions of fatherhood. Theoretical argument was brought to bear on data gathered from forty fathers who participated in discussion groups over a seven week period. The subjective nature of the experience of fatherhood was explicated using constructs from symbolic interactionism and individual psychology. By examining the data from these theoretical perspectives, a synthesis was created between issues which stem from social structures and those which exist at a personal level. It is argued that an interdisciplinary synthesis requires clear links between theory, methodology and data analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

The axiom that parents are the child's first educators pervades early childhood philosophy and practice. Personnel working in early childhood settings require a sound knowledge base in the area of family studies and sensitive insight into parent-child relationships. In pursuing information on contemporary fatherhood, the writer was challenged by contrasting perceptions of the modern father and by what appeared to be tokenism associated with the inclusion of fathers in the thinking of early childhood practitioners. Assumptions that fathers were less skilled, less available and therefore less interested in their children than mothers seemed pervasive. In contrast, the media, popular literature and some scholars were indicating that a new generation of fathers was overturning traditional behaviours and assumptions. It was against this background that a qualitative study was designed to bring men together in small discussion groups to address the research question, 'How do men themselves perceive as well as understand their experience of fatherhood in a climate of social change, and how might these meanings be constructed?'

DEVELOPMENT OF THE STUDY

A review of the literature on fatherhood (Holland, 1993) identified studies which: focused on the changing roles of fathers; quantified the extent and style of paternal involvement; focussed on antecedents and determinants of father involvement; described paternal influences on child development and investigated the impact of fatherhood on adult male development. A range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies was indicated and, while much of the research has been conducted within the disciplines of developmental psychology, psychiatry and sociology, Lamb and Oppenheim (1989:11) suggest 'attempts to achieve an interdisciplinary synthesis ... have greatly enriched understanding of the father's many roles in child development and promise to reshape research perspectives in this area'. It therefore seemed logical in the development of the study under discussion to adopt an interdisciplinary approach.

A number of large scale, longitudinal studies (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 1987; Pruett, 1987) have shown that research into the meanings men attribute to the experience of parenthood yields rich,

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valuable and previously untapped data. Stearns (1991:29) in discussing the history of fatherhood in relation to contemporary descriptions of fathers suggested that:

> *It is beginning to be possible to have a more nuanced approach to fatherhood's history than that suggested by generalised blasts against traditions, or delighted surprise at some contemporary turnabout.*

This 'nuanced' approach is derived from looking beyond simplistic comparisons between fathers and mothers to what Pruett (1987) described as the 'fabric' of fatherhood, the complex interaction of factors and the meanings men attribute to them in their roles as fathers.

The direction of the study was further influenced by a comprehensive and scholarly summary of research on parents' ideas, actions and feelings, in which Goodnow (1988:286) indicated that 'Research on parents' ideas has been described as flourishing but relatively atheoretical, and as in need of closer attention to possible methods'. Bringing theory and methodology together in a qualitative study of men's perceptions (ideas, actions and feelings) of their experience of fatherhood became central to the project.

In addition, Formaini (1990) argued that traditional psychology has failed to make the connection between issues that stem from the structure of society and those which exist at a personal level, suggesting that what is needed is a model which serves us as both individuals and members of society. The study under discussion sought to make connections between the social and personal dimensions of fatherhood by drawing on sociological and psychological constructs embedded in symbolic interactionism and individual psychology. Links between data collection and analysis enabled theoretical argument to be mounted in relation to findings.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism argues that the capacity for self-reflection and self-conscious assessment of circumstances sustains interactive processes not only in terms of self-interest, but also with regard to the interests of others. Individual conduct is influenced and regulated by the expectations and attitudes of others, and may be sustained, modified or even reversed on the basis of this reflective process (Menzies, 1982; Haralambos & Holborn, 1991). Literature indicating the meaning of fatherhood in men's lives, the shift in role definitions associated with notions of shared parenting and increased paternal involvement, as well as men's determination to have better relationships with their children than they had with their own fathers, reflects these premises.

Individual psychology

According to Individual psychology theory, behaviours emerge from the meaning individuals ascribe to experiences within the social field and therefore human personality can only be understood within this context. Three 'life tasks'; work, friendship and intimacy include all the social demands on members of human communities. The degree to which individuals successfully meet and balance these demands is a function of social interest (degree of concern for others) and lifestyle (personality style) (Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 1987). Issues associated with fathers' capacities for adapting to the responsibilities of parenthood and child rearing, their ability to balance the demands of family, work and leisure and the relation of personality style to fathering style were able to be explored using these principles.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

In a study of Australian fathers, multiple methods of data collection were used including small group discussion, questionnaires, and measures of role perceptions, social interest and lifestyle, reflecting the above theoretical premises. These multiple methods were used to tap the interpersonal and intrapersonal meanings which, it was hypothesised, men ascribe to their experience of fatherhood. The intention was to provide depth rather than simplification to what Bozett and Hanson (1991:267) described as issues of complexity and diversity which 'interact and intersect in almost infinite ways to produce attitudes towards fathering and specific fathering behaviour which are unique to each man'.

Small group discussion

In the design of small group discussions a 'parent centred model' was adopted, 'which argues that the parent's testimony is valid for its own sake' (McKee & O'Brien, 1982:8). Burgess (1984) described group interview procedures as enabling the researcher to probe for details as well as encourage participants to discuss situations and their outcomes.

Spradley (1979) identified the types of questions which are crucial to an unstructured interview style of research. These include *descriptive* questions which engage respondents in providing statements about their activities and behaviours in relation to the topic; *structural* questions which attempt to identify how informants organise their knowledge; and *contrast* questions which allow participants to discuss the meaning of situations and make comparisons. At the same time, while maintaining an agenda of topics for each session, group discussion has the potential for the group to re-define the topic and take the conversations in directions meaningful to them. In the case of the study under discussion, this also provided the opportunity for men to participate fully in the research processes through discussion and feedback from other fathers in the group.

In the Melbourne study, six groups were recruited which met once a week for two hours over seven consecutive weeks with a total of forty fathers participating. Focus questions and group activities were designed to elicit responses and discussion on key issues identified in the literature as influencing the conduct of contemporary fatherhood, with emphasis on seeking to 'understand the phenomenon under discussion from the perspective of those being studied' (Wiersma, 1986:259). Discussion centred around becoming and being a father, likes and dislikes about the role, reflections on own father in relation to own fathering, perceptions of fathering style, balancing work, family and leisure time, expectations and discipline in child rearing.

By drawing on a participant's personal experience, each group discussion engaged these men, firstly, in observation, reflection and discussion of issues; secondly, in reflection on abstract concepts, rules and principles; thirdly, in measuring or judging these formulations against their own beliefs, values and situations. In this process, a synthesis was formulated between shared information, its meaning at a social and personal level and proclivities associated with personality constructs. All discussion sessions were audiotaped, reviewed and annotated.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were used to gather demographic and background information relating to age, cultural background, socio-economic status, marital status and outside-the-home work commitment of self and partner, experience in family of origin and own experience of fatherhood. Additional data was gathered during discussion sessions through handouts on which participants were asked to make notes in answer to three or four questions in preparation for sharing these ideas in group discussion. Handouts were collected at the conclusion of the discussion thereby adding to the data. Information on perceptions of experience with their own father, values held within family of origin and own family, adjustment to fatherhood, and time allocations to work, family and leisure was gathered in this way.

Measures

Measures congruent with previously described theoretical premises were used to provide data on perceived degree of involvement in child rearing, personality characteristics and values, which the literature suggests influence men's perceptions of fatherhood. Self-report measures have been widely used in research on fathers, frequently in combination with other methods (Holland, 1993). Measures used in this study included the *Perception of Parental Role Scales*, (Gilbert & Hanson, 1983), *The Social Interest Index*, (Greever, Tseng & Friedland, 1972), *The Social Interest Scale* (Crandall, 1981) and *The Lifestyle Scale* (Kern, 1990; 1991). (Details of these measures are available from the author.)

SUMMARY OF SELECTED FINDINGS

Role Perceptions and meaning

Responses to the 78 item Perception of Parental Role Scales, indicated that fathers in this study perceived their highest frequency of involvement to be in aspects of parental role responsibility related to meeting emotional needs of children, teaching children skills of hygiene, physical health and norms and values and meeting basic material needs of children for food, clothing and shelter.

The indication of meeting emotional needs as above other parental tasks in perceived degree of involvement suggested the extent of the child-centredness of this group of fathers. Items included in this scale relate to comforting children, listening to them, giving them attention, expressing affection towards children, providing them with emotional support, holding them and making them feel important. These tasks allude to the highly expressive aspects of parenthood and responses indicated that these men perceived themselves as being more involved in meeting the affective, nurturing needs of their children than in other parental tasks. Reporting of a high level of participation in the affective domains of parenting was reflected in discussion outcomes relating to attitudes and beliefs which indicated these aspects of adult/child interaction as highly valued aspects of being a father. The wish to be much more emotionally supportive and responsive to their children than they remember their own fathers being with them also emerged as a significant factor in discussion data.

These selected findings suggest that, to a degree, fathers are engaging in a process of reflection associated with modification and change in the definitions of their role based on experience with their own fathers and an emerging sense of the psychological and social magnitude of their role in relation to children's lives. The commitment to have greater involvement with their children than they recall their own fathers having with them was strongly articulated in discussion groups. Men in the groups discussed strategies which they employed to achieve their intentions for closer family relationships, many of which involved career decisions, life style changes, significant negotiation and compromise.

Social Interest and fatherhood

Outcomes from the Social Interest Scale, which measures the degree to which respondents value interest in and concern for others, indicated that 70% of the total sample held values congruent with high social interest, while 30% held values associated with low social interest, suggesting that the majority tended to value cooperative and altruistic behaviours. The extent to which the values construct being measured moderated these men's perceptions of fatherhood was suggested in the discussion outcomes. Commonality of concerns associated with cognitive-affective domains and indications of the primacy of fatherhood in the lives of these men emerged in group interactions.

Responses to focus questions: 'What's it like being a father?; What do you like most/least?; What would you like to change?; What do you want to do differently from your own father/what do you

want to do the same?' indicated that fatherhood was a highly emotionally charged experience, one which created a sense of belonging, closeness, a sense of connectedness to other parents and children but, at the same time, fear, anguish and uncertainty. Emotions associated with the birth of each child were described as intense, unexpected, amazing, unforgettable. While expressing some ambivalence about the awesome responsibility of fatherhood, all participants saw it as a milestone in adult life, enhancing but also challenging their self-perception.

Most liked aspects of fatherhood in descending order of frequency were indicated as sharing affection and experiences with their children, children's dependence on them and feeling needed, watching children develop, teaching children and seeing children's achievements. Most disliked aspects of the role were reported overwhelmingly as those associated with discipline and/or lack of time and the impact of these issues on their relationships with children.

These findings emphasise the theoretical principles associated with social interest which relate to the unique capacity of humans for the expression of a principle of value congruent with positive, integrative behaviours (Crandall, 1981). Discussion responses from men in this study indicated satisfaction within the social task of fathering which created closeness and dissatisfaction with those associated with disruption of relationships. The capacity of fatherhood to elicit in men their potential for nurturance, other-centredness and valuing experiences that go beyond the self was evident.

Social Interest and the Life tasks

Results from the Social Interest Index, which indicates the degree of social interest associated with meeting the demands of the three life tasks, work, friendship and intimacy, revealed 70% of participants scored low and 30% scored high on this index. Results confirmed what most fathers in the study reported: that issues relating to the three life tasks were experienced as problematic, particularly in relation to balancing work, family and leisure demands and the allocation of time. They not only described these task demands as a source of continuing conflict but also in terms of their negative impact on children, partners and themselves.

One group discussion session was allocated to the exploration of individual use of time and its implications for family life. An exercise was used to assist these fathers to look at the way in which they allocated time to the various tasks required of them in the conduct of their daily lives and to explore ways they might change things if they wished. The 'Eggs-in-a-basket' exercise (Graeme Russell, *personal communication*, September 1990) required participants to distribute 20 pebbles across five areas: work time, individual time with children, time as a couple, time as a family and personal time to indicate how they perceived time spent in each of these domains.

Overall and predictably, these men allocated the largest amount of time to work, around 40%. The next highest allocation was around half that; 20% was given to family time. Individual time with children was less than family time and averaged around 15%, although some had difficulty differentiating between the two and saw them as equal. Others, however, having not considered this aspect of time allocation, perceived their time with children individually as lower. In nearly all cases, personal and couple time had the least time allocation, averaging between 5% and 10%.

These findings suggest why scores on the Social Interest Scale were the reverse of those on the Social Interest Index. It is reasonable to conclude that the balancing of life tasks is challenging and difficult for many fathers to achieve regardless of their values and preferences. This created much of the tension experienced by these men in meeting the demands of family living, suggesting that the intentions for more commitment to involved fatherhood in the lives of these men continues to be overshadowed by the dominance of work.

Lifestyle and fathering style

Lifestyle describes characteristic patterns or styles of conduct which give unity and purpose to behaviour. Typical personality styles are described by Kern (1990) as perfectionist, controller, need-to-please, victim and martyr. Briefly summarised, lifestyle priorities in the total group of fathers as measured by the Lifestyle Scale were indicated as 40% Perfectionist; 17.5% Control; 15% Pleaser; 22.5% Victim and 12.5% Martyr.

The representation of Perfectionist lifestyle as almost twice any other priority was not surprising given that these subjects volunteered to participate in the study and were therefore likely to have a high commitment to fathering and possibly high standards for themselves as fathers reflective of this lifestyle category. Some perfectionist lifestyles created dissatisfaction in the fathering role as demands and expectations of self, children and partners tended to be excessively high and, therefore, unachievable in the face of other life demands. At the same time, this lifestyle priority engaged some fathers in pursuing an ideal for fatherhood consistent with creative, thoughtful, cooperative and integrative styles of involved fathering.

Victim lifestyle responses were indicated in feelings of being dominated by events outside the family. This was associated with a sense of having little control over these undesirable and difficult influences, particularly in relation to children's life directions. At the same time, this lifestyle characteristic engaged some fathers in the maintenance of family relationships in ways which they believed balanced injustices and moderated external influences. This was expressed by some in a strong desire to avoid victimisation in family relationships. This was also associated with attempts to develop the self-esteem in children which they perceived as having themselves struggled to maintain in the face of destructive relationships with their own fathers or siblings.

The lifestyle priority of control was indicated in discussion about decision making and discipline in the family, particularly the need to win in conflict situations. The extent to which fathers believed they should dominate and control events in family life and within other life tasks provided insight into frustration with, and resistance to, change. Controlling personalities also indicated fathering preferences which sought to maintain a constructive level of order in family life, particularly in monitoring children's needs and the utilisation of time.

The need-to-please lifestyle was less dominant in the group and was evident in participants who described being motivated by a desire to keep all family members as happy as possible. Meeting the needs of children and partners was a high priority but this was also indicated as being at a cost. The sense of being swamped by the desire to please was expressed as well as a sense of guilt when the goal was not achieved.

Martyr lifestyle characteristics provided insight into the experiences of a few in the group who described the tasks of fatherhood as excessively demanding on top of other, equally unavoidable demands. Expressions of being unable to meet the expectations of the new, highly involved father were associated with this lifestyle and included being critical of self and others. At the same time, these individuals expressed a strong desire to evidence many of the characteristics of the highly nurturant father.

Within individual personality, lifestyle priorities provide a theme for human conduct and therefore an indication of parenting style. Lifestyle originates in the cultural and social matrix of the family of origin, particularly the behavioural models of parents and is an aspect of the way in which individuals understand events as well as ascribe and interpret meanings within social groups. Fathers in this study indicated attitudes and behaviours indicative of personality priorities which may assist or work against the adoption of a more involved father role. Values congruent with high or low social interest moderate between lifestyle characteristics and conduct to the extent that personality will be helpful or unhelpful within family relationships, increase or decrease satisfaction with role performance.

CONCLUSION

This paper has indicated, in summary form, the way in which constructs from symbolic interactionism and individual psychology can be utilised to explore men's perceptions of fatherhood, addressing concerns about atheoretical approaches to parenting research and the argument that traditional psychological approaches disregard the social issues in the understanding of human conduct.

Within descriptions of theoretical premises, connections have been articulated between individual responses at a social, interpersonal level and those at a psychological, intrapersonal level. Symbolic interactionism argues the social embeddedness of human experience, that experiences can only be understood through the meanings attributed to them and that change is a function of the human capacity for self-reflection and self-conscious assessment of circumstances. Individual psychology offers constructs which indicate psychological processes as socially influenced, beginning in the family of origin and emerging as personality characteristics and values. The relevance of these constructs to investigations of fatherhood had been indicated in previous research.

The design of the study enabled a synthesis to be established between theory, methodology and data interpretation. The range of data collection methods enabled interpretation of the meaning men attribute to the tasks and experiences of fatherhood to be explored through theoretical constructs. This research suggests that studies of fathers' perceptions of their experience of parenthood using an interdisciplinary approach can broaden existing narrow conceptions of men's roles and avoid the creation of a replacement stereotype for fatherhood. The described methodology could be used to further explore the meanings partners and children attribute to fathers' conduct and the extent to which meanings are created intrapersonally and shared interpersonally within the fabric of the family.

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